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ABSTRACT

In this paper, which projects a global image of the future of the world, the Montessori approach to education is advanced as a way of preparing coming generations to meet the challenges of the future. (Author/RH)

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## DO NOT BEQUEATH A SHAMBLE

# THE CHILD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: INNOCENT HOSTAGE TO MINDLESS OPPRESSION OR CHILDREN AS MESSENGERS TO THE WORLD

by John J. McDermott, Ph.D.

*What the best and wisest parent wants for his [her] own child, that must the community want for all of its children.* John Dewey[1]

*[We] will not be the victim of events, but will have the clarity of vision to direct and shape the future of human society.* Maria Montessori[2]

What could be more poignant and disturbing than the photographs of the faces of victimized children over the past fifty years. Beginning with the children of the holocaust and on through the devastation of the second world war, Biafra, Vietnam, Laos, until our own time in Cambodia, their blank, bewildered stares flare out from their gaunt, malnutritioned bodies. The ravages of global violence are especially addressed to the children. Their innocence in these conflicts are stark reminders of the systematic madness that plagues all societies, which one by one, become self-righteous and oblivious to the nature of their victims as one cause or another is pursued. I would be more confident in the possibility of the praiseworthy movement for care of the unborn generations, if I were to see equal care for those who have just been born, the children of the world.

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As we begin its penultimate decade, the twentieth century has been a tumultuous and inordinately complex century. We should remind ourselves that we not only approach the end of a century, but of a millennium as well. In that regard, the twentieth century brings to a head, hundreds of years of yearning and cultural experiences, which yield a legacy that we avoid at deep peril. Some decades ago, we viewed the coming of the twenty-first century with considerable romantic optimism. The year 2001 connoted the marvels of space technology and liberation from the burdens of the industrial world. Recent events have rendered that version

[1] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1915), p.7.

[2] Maria Montessori, *Education for a New World* (Adyar: Kalakshetra Publications, 1959), p. 3.

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of our future unrealistic and, dare we say it, experientially shallow. I say shallow, because the vision of the next century left out the gnawing problems of the planet earth, as though they could be transcended and thereby, forgotten. This attitude, it now turns out, was vulgar naiveté. No, the legacy of the twentieth century is more sobering, although I do not gainsay the potential significance of its spiritual bequest. Let us examine this legacy in some detail.

As the inheritors of Western culture, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in our consciousness. We now think and feel in global terms. The second world war signaled both the end of the colonialism and the beginning of the full planetary consciousness. Those of us who were educated in the first fifty years of this century, were introduced to a warped cultural map of the past. We were taught one version or another of a Euro-American provincialism, as though a majority of the world's population and their historical achievements were obsolete. Our strident refusal to learn the language of other lands was peculiarly coupled with our penchant for quick tours in which we gawked at the monuments of what we too often took to be a dead past. The splendid Cambodian monument of Angkor Wat attests to the majesty of a storied history but in our time, the photo-teletype sends us the pictures of hordes of deracinated and emaciated Cambodian children, victims of the power politics which rage around them, as indifferent to their future as to their past.

The last four decades of geopolitics have profoundly transformed our consciousness. Now, to be truly human, we must think in planetary, global terms. I remember vividly when this transformation began to take shape in my own mind. The year was 1954 and I read of the impending Conference to be held at Bandung, Indonesia. They announced that no 'white' nations would be invited, and it was at that Conference, that the gathered nations described themselves as "the third world". The impact of that Conference was obvious; East and West were no longer apt planetary divisions. Subsequent to the event, we have seen the re-emergence of Africa, China and the nations of the Latin America as distinctive and distinguished forces on the world stage. Human culture is now truly world culture. Our experience of literature, religion, philosophy, dance, music, art and costume have been immeasurably enriched. The only viable strategy for our global future is the adoption of a pluralism, in which the angles of visions, styles, and beliefs of the world's cultures, mesh in the creation of a genuinely egalitarian world society.

There is no question that this spiritual bequest of the twentieth century on behalf of global consciousness is salutary. Nonetheless, there is a dark side to our new found awareness, for no sooner do we become aware of the riches of global culture, than we realize the attendant problems which also emerge. In truth, the glaring fact of the matter is that we are now faced with a crisis of global proportions. This situation takes the form of a crisis in energy, food, ecology and population, to which is added the ambivalence of high technology. We talk now about the world in which our children's children will come to consciousness.

However difficult it may be for us to comprehend existentially, it is necessary for us to project the future and to assess its viability by analysis of our present plight. Although I am not given to Cassandra-like prophecies of doom, we must face the

fact, nonetheless, that we are witness to a planetary siege mentality.[3] Our most serious difficulty, despite its being hidden from most of the bourgeois world, is that of food. Despite the extraordinary advances of modern agricultural technology, the geometric increase in the world's population has raised the spectre of widening human sectors in which future starvation is a high probability. It is a well-known paradox that the people who can least afford to have children, have them, whereas the birth rate among the affluent, and especially among the middle class, has dropped. As contemporary anthropologists have detailed, the reasons for this are culturally complex and perhaps impervious to a solution. Yet, the brutal fact prevails; there exists an inverse ratio between those who have the resources and those who have the need. So serious is this matter, that allegedly thoughtful people have introduced the notion of triage into the field of world hunger. Taken over from the language of the battlefield, the word triage refers to tripartite division of the wounded as found in the field hospital. The breakdown is as follows: those who will die, even if treated; those who will live, even if not treated; and those who will live, only if treated. The first category is abandoned, the second is asked to suffer through to resolution, whereas the resources are given only to the last group. The analog to world hunger does not hold, for all, if fed, could live. But food triage, depressingly, has been considered as a serious option on the ground that in time, there will be enough food for some but not for all. The question facing our children is who gets the food. Or is the question different, that is, who among the next generations will be willing to cut their consumption drastically, so that all may eat? Of course, the true doomsday prophet foresees a solution to world starvation and overpopulation, the latter estimated conservatively at seven billion people forty years from now, namely, nuclear conflagration.

To the twin problems of food and population, we now add the depletion of non-renewable resources, known in the jargon as the energy crisis. In addition to the obvious economic hardships this crisis can generate, we should focus also on the deeply personal disadvantages which will accrue. The key word here is accessibility, namely, the denial of the possibility of visiting the distant environs which surround us and still more crucial, the denial of the possibility of visiting each other. We face a social impacting and a loss of national, let alone global consciousness. We must implore our children to search for viable alternatives so that this crisis will be averted, else they will plunge backward into the provincial limitations of centuries past.

The irony of the above difficulties is that a resolution would be forthcoming if it were not for the emergence of still another world problem, that of ecological

[3]Apocalyptic literature, which portends our impending disaster, is not pleasant to read. Still, if only half of the predictions are correct, our children and their children, face an enormously hazardous future. cf; e.g., Gordon Rattray Taylor, *The Doomsday Book* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1970); *Blueprint for Survival* (New York: New American Library, 1972); Donella H. Meadows, et.al., *The Limits of Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972); Raymond F. Dasmann, *Planet in Peril* (New York: Meridian Books, 1972); Lester Brown, *The Twenty Ninth Day* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); Paul Colinvaux, *Why Big Fierce Animals are Rare and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977).

trashing. Symbolically, this is the most unsettling of all of our problems, for it results from the fallout of some of our most successful endeavors. John Dewey long ago told us that we were in an irresolute struggle with the affairs of nature, and that nature, if abused would strike back.

> Time is brief, and this statement must stand instead of the discourse which the subject deserves. Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons. Although persistent, they are sporadic, episodic. It is darkest just before dawn; pride goes before a fall; the moment of greatest prosperity is the moment most charged with ill-omen, most opportune for the evil eye. Plague, famine, failure of crops, disease, death, defeat in battle, are always just around the corner, and so are abundance, strength, victory, festival and song. Luck is proverbially both good and bad in its distributions. The sacred and the accursed are potentialities of the same situation; and there is no category of things which has not embodied the sacred and accursed: persons, words, places, times, directions in space, stones, winds, animals, stars.

Surely, the warning is clear; "the world is a scene of risk." The solution of those problems most bothersome to one generation, often become irresolute difficulties of a subsequent generation. Time extracts its price. We and our children are inheriting polluted oceans, rivers, lakes, streams and air. Some of us live on top of Love Canals, obviously inappropriately named as their noxious fumes and chemicals penetrate our deepest genetic structure. We, in our generation, have committed the cardinal sin. Instead of bequeathing a "leg up", a better world, or whatever cliché comes to mind, we have passed on a time bomb. Our children's ecological future is fraught with the residue of chemical seedings, poisonous in the long run. Our present generation is trapped in a classic case of Catch-22. The energy crisis threatens our economic stability, our social patterns, and even penetrates to our long held image of ourselves as a necessarily mobile people. Yet, our potential resolutions of this problem are foreboding in their own right. If we re-open our massive coal reserves, we heighten our pollution level and expand the deadly presence of acid rain, which has already deadened hundreds of lakes and thousands of fish in upper New York State. The turn to nuclear power is even more frightening, as the events of Three Mile Island graphically attest. The genius of high technology is necessary to ameliorate the world's problems just detailed. Yet, it is that same high technology which has so threatened the delicate balance of the world's ecosystem, especially in its bio-chemical arrangements.

The rights and needs of the present generations must be set over against the rights and needs of unborn generations, world-wide. Our children will have to be the generation which effects the transition from the present-mindedness which has dominated the recent centuries to a forward looking care for future generations by assuring a perpetuity of resources and by a resisting of the short-run exploitation of nature. Further, although not sufficient for a resolution of these perplexing and abiding problems, it would be symbolically significant if the present generation would begin a concerted effort to stop trashing our environment. And, on this behalf, the messages of ecologists should be built into every curriculum, from the

teaching of pre-school children on to university life and adult education. As we know, there is considerable religious fervor loose in the world. I, for one, am not very impressed by its ideological self-righteousness and its abandonment of the problems most pressing to most of us. Better if that energy were addressed to what is truly sacred in our lives, our land, our things, and living space and above all, our ability to provide for a creative future for our children.

What we must avoid, is the increasing sense of our haplessness in the face of these difficulties. Many of us feel dwarfed or even trivialized by the events of this century. Too often, then, our tendency is to abandon our best instincts for amelioration and to dilute our energies in favor of either a laissez-faire attitude or some form of extra-terrestrial resolution. This will not do, for the forces of exploitation and manipulation do not so sleep or become seduced by nostrums of another worldly cast. Rather, we must begin and where begun, intensify, a re-education of our attitudes toward the future and especially toward our use of the planet earth.

II

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this paper and, more tellingly, beyond my competence, to offer technical and specific resolutions of these difficulties. Fortunately, we have a different task at hand, namely, our educational bequest, such that our children and their children will be better prepared for the next century than we seem to be. And, in this context, the backdrop of our consideration is the work of Maria Montessori. Her explicit contributions to our discussion are threefold. First, she is the first and, in fact, the only truly global educator. Second, however unwitting it may have been, she has anticipated the decline of the nuclear family as the primary source of pre-school education. In this regard, she has been especially acute in helping us to cut between the twin pitfalls of sentimentality and indifference in our relationship to children. Third, we can learn from her notion of the prepared environment and her structuring of the attitudes of care for that environment on the part of participating children. Her work in this area could become an important strand in rebuilding our care for the earth. Let us examine these contributions, *seriatim,* in an effort to forge a pedagogy more sensitive to our actual situation than is the haphazard methodology of most of our peers.

Initially, the most striking feature of Montessori's work is that her method, her teachers and her learning children in her programs are to be found throughout the world. No other educator has such global influence, for although Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Herbart, and Piaget have each made their contributions, they are restricted for the most part to western culture. John Dewey, it is true, has had enormous influence in the Orient but not in Western Europe, nor the third world. Montessori, to the contrary, has struck a universal chord in the lives of children, wherever they are found. I trace this important fact to three sources. First, she wisely believed that children of very early age had abilities to learn, independent of their peer group cultures, which were rarely tapped in any formal way. Second, it was not necessary to import teachers who had a secret message to deliver. Indeed, teachers in the usual sense were not part of the Montessori picture. Rather, the presence of Montessori directresses and

later directors, could be either imported or homegrown, so long as they honored the auto-didactic activities of the children. It was the children, after all, who taught themselves, so long as the environment was prepared, the materials utilized and the goals or directions made clear. In very young children this could and has taken place in a wide variety of cultures throughout the world. Third, the Montessori children were not class structured. From the first days of the Casa dei Bambini, Montessori was convinced that children of all backgrounds and all cultural limitations were capable of self-learning.[4] Indeed, it is often characteristic of a Montessori program that the children are representative of a far wider range of cultural and economic advantages than the more traditional programs.

The global influence of Montessori was not an accident of history. Long before our own awareness of the inextricability of our lives on this planet, she saw the need for the recognition and development of the abilities of children throughout the world. As early as 1910, she resigned her lectureship at the University of Rome and struck her name from the list of practicing physicians, and committed herself to "all the children in the world, born and as yet unborn."[5] She then began a life-long journey on behalf of children's rights and of their liberation from the darkness of unknowing. Her work was to take her beyond Italy to the United States, Latin America, India, Ceylon, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Spain, Austria, and Pakistan. Unesco had its spiritual if unsung founder and the global consciousness of our time can look back now on its remarkable anticipation by this remarkable woman educator.

I turn now to Montessori's second contribution to our time and its significance for the future, namely her contributions to the potential independence of young children from parental structures for the purpose of learning. Allow me to be front-out at this point. I do not believe that pre-school programs or day-care centers are the optimum environment for young children. In that regard, I am an unabashed believer, only so far as children are concerned, in the structure of the nuclear family. Increasingly, for a wide variety of reasons, this belief is out of step with the social realities of our present situation in America, to say nothing of cultures distant from us. Speaking only of our own American culture, the signs are telling, for the growing irrelevance of my point of view. Soaring divorce rates, single parents, homesexual marriages and most of all, the tremendous increase of women's participation in the public economic sector, all point to the need for an extraordinary increase in the care of preschool children. And, these developments, of course, are in addition to the always shocking displacement of children in various countries due to war, famine or one or another lethal political dispute.

I do not see Montessori's approach to the education of young children as a

[4]cf. Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori, A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), pp. 107-157.
[5]cf. E.M. Standing, *Maria Montessori, Her Life and Work* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 61. cf. also, Kramer, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-157.

panacea, any more than could that of any single perspective. Yet, in these troubled times, which point to still more vast difficulties, her philosophy of the child takes on increased meaning. Of special importance is her insistence that we have both a deep and abiding care for the child and a firm commitment to the independence and irrevocable liberty of the child. It is the persistent transaction of these two attitudes, situation by situation, which gives the wisdom to Montessori's educational practice. As parents and teachers, we are often vulnerable to the children in our care, such that out of a sense of our own inadequacy, or frustration at their inadequacy, we either indulge them or lose confidence in their ability and thereby shut them down.

Montessori teaches us that young children are more capable than we assume, but she also stresses that they need more shepherding than we are often willing to give. For those who came to consciousness under the influence of Freud, there seems to be something irreducibly simplistic about Montessori's version of the child, to say nothing of her ineptitude on the crucial problem of sexual development. Yet, as we develop global consciousness and take into our purview, the lives of children around the world, the high bourgeois ethos of Freud and other practitioners of our assorted neuroses, despite its intrinsic fascination, seems to fade in the order of relevance. So too with the much ballyhooed electronic revolution that we were told was imminent. An occasional child may have an "$R_2D_2$" as a companion, but the more likely future will be characterized by the struggle for physical sustenance and for a place rather than a room of one's own. If we truly believe in the future of our children, we shall teach them to care about the world in which they are going to find themselves, a world notably more recalcitrant than the one in which we live. And this leads us to Montessori's third contribution to life in the twenty-first century, that of her notion of a prepared environment and her doctrine of things.[6]

In speaking of the prepared environment and the didactic materials, I have no intention of returning to the earlier internecine struggles among Montessorians as to whether the environment and the materials were either impervious to innovation or in desperate need of innovation. Fifteen years ago I wrote on this issue as follows:[7] The notion of structure, so central to Montessori's thought; does not of itself preclude the variety of experiences that is indispensable for learning. The entire criticism of her approach is rendered ineffectual by Montessori's explicit remarks in *Spontaneous Activity in Education,* relative to novelty. She writes, "as a fact, every object may have infinite attributes; and if, as often happens in object-lessons, the origins and ultimate ends of the object itself are included among these attributes, the mind has literally

[6]cf. John J. McDermott, "Introduction", Maria Montessori, *Spontaneous Activity in Education* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965) (1977), pp. xvi-xxiv, for a discussion of the prepared environment in the light of the culturally disadvantaged child.

[7]The following passage, with editorial changes, is taken from McDermott, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

to range throughout the universe."[8] It is not simply a question of quantity that is at stake here; rather the relationship between the potentialities of the child and the *kind* of experiences offered. It is not the number of options that constitutes novelty, for as Montessori states, "it is the qualities of the objects, not the objects themselves which are important."[9]

With this important caveat of Montessori in mind, and in the light of our present discussion, let us consider the significance of the prepared environment and of the didactic materials. The Montessori environment is prepared in that certain materials are to be used, and used in an orderly way. It is, however, just as much a preparing environment, for the child must come to grips with its structure, its advantages and its limitations. The Montessori child is not a robot who is slotted into a tight, rigid and programmed environment. Rather, the key to Montessori's philosophy of education is that the child is a potentially explosive organism, who will respond to the proper tactile stimuli. The prepared environment is an open-ended nest, in which feeding, growth and finally maturation beyond its bounds, takes place. The most creative and seminal characteristic of the prepared environment is that the children take responsibility for it and for their relationship to it. In a word, they care. Further, they care about each other, for each is dependent on the rest, if the environment is to be truly seminal for the awakening of each child's ability. The entire endeavor is shared, although each child has his or her distinct personal process underway, as is symbolized in the periodic experience of silence undergone by the children.[10] Even more significant, for our present discussion, is that the children, when finished with the materials, return them to their proper resting place where they can be used by another child. This use of the materials is analogous to our deep need in the next generations to arrive at a state wherein we do not plunder, that is, do not go beyond the fixed limits of the non-renewable resource. How different would be our situation if the present generation were taught as children, the existential reality that others follow us and must subsequently use the things that we use.

We have still one more dimension of Montessori's use of materials. She has a superb sense of their tacility and the way in which children are profoundly informed and conceptually transformed by the activities of their bodies, especially their hands. The intimacy of the child to the world is thereby not limited to the affairs of nature. Indeed, things, artifacts, are neither neutral, nor inert, but carry with them the capacity to stir and provoke the sensorial foundations for learning, which each of us carries deep within our nascent person. To learn to read with the hands as well as with the eyes, is a marvelous melding of mind and body, concept and percept, in a pedagogical strategy that is worthy of the fact that such dualisms are not experientially separate

[8]Maria Montessori, *Spontaneous Activity in Education*, p. 207.

[9]Montessori, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

[10]Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964)(1912), p. 212-214.

in the first place. For Montessori, to touch is to be touched. She places herself in that long tradition of thought which holds that the world and all of its doings, speak to us out of the very depth of being and meaning.

Montessori has offered us a first step in understanding the power of our things. Her materials, sparse in number and comparatively simple are but an opening wedge into the vast range of possibilities upon which we can call to educate our children. Modern technology has made available an endless range of materials, each different in shape, composition, surface and function. Children throughout the world should place their hands on samples of all of them and so learn of their viability, their use, their fragility and above all, of their danger. In the context of classical Montessori education, allow me to introduce just three new ways of dealing with the environment, all of which are essential to education in the twenty-first century. In addition to the classical materials, I would introduce materials that are highly desirable, but not enough of them to go around, rather just enough to be frustrating. This situation would introduce the children to a structural sense of scarcity. Other materials would be introduced, but when used, would be consumed and non-renewable. The question here, is who gets to use them. Finally, I would introduce materials which not only corrode themselves, but corrode the other materials as well. And here, we have the experience of pollution. Unpleasant pedagogy? Yes, decidedly so, but a necessary pedagogy, nonetheless.

I, for one, take the message of the ecologists at dead reckoning. In my judgment, the classroom should be structured as a miniature ecosystem. What better than a Montessori approach as suitable for this pedagogical move to the twenty-first century? Combined with the best implications of the revolution in the arts, and the revolution in design, we could encourage our children to begin, from their beginning, to participate in and slowly develop on their own terms, an environment which is aesthetically alive, pedagogically responsive and ecologically responsible. I offer that it is our responsibility on behalf of succeeding generations, that we forge this new creative and fail-safe pedagogy.

Finally, what after all are our options, our alternatives? One is the voice of the doomsday squad, who divide over two equally reprehensible and unacceptable alternatives; nuclear conflagration and world-wide starvation. At the opposite pole, we have the pollyanna optimists, combined with science fiction, who see half of the world re-locating to outer space by the twenty-second century. If the first alternative is unacceptable, the second is unlikely. Do we have a third alternative? I believe that we do, although it is neither as foreboding nor as dramatic as the first two options. Let us own up to our situation, honestly and without illusion. We must remake the earth in the image of our best qualities. We must dilute and even topple the forces of aggrandizement and exploitation. Nothing will rescue us except ourselves. Neither the gods nor the forces of nature are on our side. We must reconstitute the awe and the reverence of the earliest people in our quest for a new relationship with the

world in which we find ourselves. We are the enemy and we are the saviors. The planet awaits our decision. Which shall it be? This is the message I tell my children and I suggest that it is the message you tell your children and that they should tell their children. Shall our children be innocent hostages to mindless oppression and ecological disaster, or shall they be in fact and in deed, and in imagination, messengers to the building of a truly human world?

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